DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 673 TE 500 326

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The Posthumous Reputation of Professor Crump.
National Council of Teachers of English, Champaign, Ill.
Pub Date Dec 64
Note-5p.
Journal Cit-College English; v26 n3 p218-222 December 1964
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35
Descriptors-*Academic Rank (Professional), College Faculty, *College Teachers, Degrees (Titles), Effective Teaching, *English, Failure Factors, Performance Factors, Professional Recognition, Professors, Research Reviews (Publications), Scholarly Journals, *Success Factors, *Teacher Promotion, Teacher Qualifications, Teacher Stereotypes, Teaching Quality

The publishing requirements, honorary degrees, and the assessment of literary merit are mocked in this brief piece of fiction concerning the professional advancement of college English teachers. (AF)

ED030673

College English, December, 1964
Volume 26, Number 3

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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The Posthumous Reputation of Professor Crump

DAVID M. REIN

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WHEN I WAS A YOUNG INSTRUCTOR I was quite indifferent to rank. While going to college, I studied little and had no plans and when, unexpectedly, a teaching post was offered I was so delighted I wanted little more. The higher ranks seemed so far beyond my grasp, I dared not aspire to them. I did, however, want to become an assistant professor so that I would be referred to as Professor Worth —Professor James P. Worth, to state it completely.

When I received my first promotion,

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therefore, I was satisfied. I always did like to talk and, if I say so myself, am pretty good at it. I was in steady demand as a lecturer, speaking to social groups, to business organizations and to literary clubs. I looked forward to each of these speaking engagements with the keenest of pleasures, and never spent much time in preparation. With a few hasty notes on a card, I could speak fluently to any audience. I needed my most extensive preparation when I would give a book review, for then, of course, I did have to read the book.

For a few years I was quite happy this way, the center of admiring audiences, popular with my students, and appreciated by my wife. But in various little ways I began to feel slighted. Occasionally, before a lecture when publicity was being prepared, I would be asked my rank. Sometimes when I answered, "Assistant professor," I would fancy that my questioner looked surprised or even disappointed. A well-known lecturer like myself, a literary man of such distinction—and only an assistant professor!

One spring when the new contracts came out, Assistant Professor X was promoted to associate professor while I wasn't. Dr. X was younger than I, newer at the school, and had been an assistant professor for less time. I was outraged, humiliated, indignant. My feelings were not improved when Professor X, in a great show of sympathy, expressed his deep sorrow at my failure to move up with him.

I went to see my department chairman. "You don't have enough publications," he told me. "You have only two. Is that right?"

"Correct. 'Swift as a Satirist' and 'Swift as a Poet.' Both published in the scholarly *HELJ, History of English Literature Journal.*"

"For an associate professorship," he proclaimed, "That is not enough!"

During the next several months I wrote two scholarly articles, both of which were accepted within the year, "The Reputation of Swift in America, 1750-1800," published by the *HELJ*, and "The Reputation of Swift in America, 1800-1850," published in the *PESMLS*, the *Publication of the Eastern Seacoast branch of the Modern Language Society*.

The following year I was promoted to the rank of associate professor. I regret to say that I was happy with my new honor for only a short time. I soon longed for another promotion. I enjoyed my classes while I taught them and I enjoyed the applause at my lectures—but even as I walked away from such triumphs the sweet taste of success would turn sour. All that I was and did, I felt, was thrown in the scale and added up—and the total was always short. I was everywhere and always haunted by the limiting word which shouted of recognition withheld, *associate* professor. And I knew I could never get satisfaction until that limit was taken off my rewards.

While I had no gift for writing and no love for it, I continued to do research and build up my list of publications. I published "The Reputation of Swift in America, 1850-1900," and "The Reputation of Swift in America, 1900-1950." At this stage, I thought of approaching my chairman, but dared not. He would see, all too clearly, that while the quantity was there, variety was lacking. He was no man to be swept off his feet by numbers alone.

An article showing a different facet of my talent would be necessary. I decided to write an appreciative, critical piece on my favorite poet, John Keats. But I could get no ideas. I could make the standard comments about the sensuous quality of his imagery, about the pathos of his untimely death, about the intensity of his romantic love—comments that might go over big at a lecture, but would not impress the stern editors of the scholarly journals. For the life of me I could think

of nothing new to say about John Keats.

With defeat staring me in the face I tried to salvage something. I found myself envying my previous articles and trying to duplicate them. I would settle, at present, for more of the same. I tried to recall my plan of attack, my approach in these successful articles. Finally, after months of struggle, I finished "The Reputation of John Keats in the United States, 1850-1900." It was the best I could do and I was relieved indeed when it was accepted for publication by the *AJLC*, the *American Journal of Literature and Culture*.

"That's fine," my chairman said when I told him of my new success, "but a full professorship is the highest honor we have to give. The recipient should have a published book to his credit."

The idea of writing a book I found appalling, incredibly distasteful. Writing a book was for hermits who hated people, or zealots in love with their own ideas, or those fortunate few who could write out of themselves and didn't have to do research. For me it would mean painfully lonesome hours of routine research, of taking notes and organizing them. But I wanted that promotion so badly, I decided to repress my feelings and write a book.

Alas, I could think of absolutely nothing to write about. I went over the whole range of English and American literature, from Chaucer to Hemingway, and could think of absolutely nothing to say that might be publishable.

One day when I was deep in despair my wife came to me with a letter from her aunt. There was a favor to be done, and I was the logical man to do it. My wife's aunt, Mrs. Crump, had been married to a college professor of English like myself and there was a remarkable similarity between his situation and my own. He had died a year ago at the age of fifty-six, an assistant professor. He had been a non-conformist, a man who despised his superiors and shunned his colleagues. He had a passionate love of literature which he shared with his students alone. They found him affable, charming, and a superb teacher. In his office he was always accessible, but once he stepped out he was remote, unapproachable, consumed by his own thoughts. He ridiculed the scholarly research of his colleagues, sneered at the professional journals, and published absolutely nothing himself.

I, too, regarded him as an eccentric and, though we were in the same profession and related, and though he lived but one hundred miles away, I had almost nothing to do with him. My wife and Mrs. Crump exchanged one or two letters a year and that was it.

Mrs. Crump's letter contained a strange revelation. Her husband during his lifetime had written nearly two hundred poems, which he had polished and repolished. He had written them solely for his own pleasure, and had tried, unsuccessfully, to publish only one or two of them. Mrs. Crump thought the poems were wonderful and had shown them to the press of his University, which had agreed to publish a small volume containing one hundred poems, for a subsidy of one thousand dollars. Mrs. Crump wanted me to help her select the one hundred poems and to write a preface, giving some biographical facts and praising her husband's work. To encourage me, she sent a dozen of his poems, presumably his best.

"You will do it?" asked my wife.

"I don't really want to. I don't think the poems are very good."

"That's beside the point. You can't refuse my aunt."

"But the poems—I don't think they're any good!"

"You can still say something nice about them, can't you?" There were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, all right," I said, "If that's the way you feel!"

And so I got trapped with the job. In the preface, when I had to describe the poems I resorted to that innocuous word, that frequent cover for a multitude of sins, *interesting*. My wife would not allow it to stand. "You must say more than that," she insisted. "Would it hurt you to say they are *excellent*?"

"Yes it would. I have my integrity to think of."

"Well, *think* about it," she said, "and then do as I say."

Finally we compromised on *fascinating*. She was quite pleased with the word, and I felt it was noncommittal. After all, a work could be fascinating for any one of several reasons. In fact, some of the worst freshmen themes I ever got could qualify as *fascinating*.

When the book was published the results were remarkable—to put it mildly. Whether it was the fierce independence expressed in the poems, the resolute contempt of the author for whatever might befall him—something in the book caught the mood of our time. The *New York Sun* gave it the lead review and weekly *Trend* magazine ran a special story headed "The Courage of an Individualist." This new book, the *Pacific Monthly* pointed out, proved once again that poetry was very much alive, that it could be written in plain, comprehensible English. A number of magazines printed Crump's picture, with mine beside it. I, too, was becoming famous as the man who had discovered Crump.

My wife, in public, allowed me my honors, but in private sang many a variation on the theme, "It's a good thing you listened to me." And my college, when contract time came around, gave me the reward I so intensely desired. I became at last Professor of English, with no qualifying strings attached. I was indeed a proud man.

But I was to be given an additional, and even more distinctive honor. It seems that Crump's college, Midcontinent University, now felt embarrassed. He had served it well throughout his whole academic life, nearly twenty-five years, and he had died in the lowly rank of assistant professor. Most of the accounts pointed this out—some quite emphatically. The college wished to make amends. But was there any suitable way?

Someone suggested that Crump be awarded a full professorship posthumously. But that was dismissed as too awkward—and absolutely unprecedented. Men were not promoted after they were dead—and certainly, under no circumstances, two ranks at a time. Finally it was suggested that Crump be awarded an honorary doctorate. At first there was some opposition to this, on the grounds that such honors were never offered to anyone who could not be present at the ceremony. But this opposition melted when it was pointed out that congressional medals of honor were frequently conferred posthumously.

With this decision, I am told, everybody was happy. The sudden fame of Professor Crump, instead of embarrassing the college, could now be made to glorify it. All that remained to be done, it seemed, was to choose a commencement speaker who would put the right gloss on the whole affair.

As the man who had discovered Crump I was invited to perform this task. As I have said, I love to speak and can do so fluently with but little preparation. When the day came, it was indeed an occasion. All the dignitaries of the college were there, as well as prominent people from the town, including the mayor. In this large auditorium, filled to capacity, I faced quite a challenge—successfully. I was at my best. When I finished, the applause was long and loud and the whole audience, at a word from the chairman, stood up in honor of Professor Crump.

But in every triumph, even the most

glorious, there is always something lacking. People now, it seems, expect me to produce books or articles in keeping with my newly-won repute. I am not, of course, very eager to fulfill this expectation. In fact, I do fear that I shall be sorely tempted to rest on my laurels.

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